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ABSTRACT

This study examined the attitudes and perceptions of teachers using the whole language approach to teaching reading with those of teachers using the basal approach. Specifically, attitudes were compared based on teachers' instructional selection, district mandates, and personal demographics. Data on attitudes and opinions concerning the teaching of reading using the whole language approach were obtained from 156 elementary school teachers across the state of Mississippi. The data were examined in terms of the respondent's basic classification variables, which included age, teaching experience, educational qualifications, experience in teaching whole language, experience utilizing the basal approach, reason for teaching, and educational content area. The results indicated that the elementary teachers, whether electively using whole language, or mandated by the various school districts, overwhelmingly supported the use of the whole language approach to teaching reading as compared to the basal approach. (Contains 16 references.) (Author/JB)

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ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS EXPRESSED BY TEACHERS ACROSS THE STATE OF MISSISSIPPI TOWARD THE WHOLE LANGUAGE APPROACH TO TEACHING READING

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the attitudes and perceptions of teachers using the whole language approach to teaching reading with those teachers using the basal approach. Specifically, attitudes were compared based on teachers instructional selection, district mandates, and personal demographics.

Data on attitudes and opinions concerning the teaching of reading using the whole language approach were obtained from 156 elementary school teachers across the state of Mississippi. The data were examined in terms of the respondent's basic classification variables which included age, teaching experience, educational qualifications, experience in teaching whole language, experience teaching utilizing the basal approach, reason for teaching, and educational content area. Three statistical procedures, Descriptive, Chi-Square Goodness of Fit, and Chi-Square Test of Independence were utilized in the analysis.

The results indicated that the elementary teachers, whether selectively using whole language, or mandated by the various school districts, overwhelmingly supported the use of the whole language approach to teach reading as compared to the basal approach.

INTRODUCTION

The teaching of reading has been a source of a tremendous amount of debate for years. Presently, major changes in reading curriculums are sweeping the country. Educational researchers are constantly challenged in an effort to determine an effective strategy that is the most effective method of teaching reading skills to young children. In addition, parents are continuously pressuring the educational system to teach children to read at ages that were unheard of two decades ago.

In these turbulent times, our fight for literacy, are causing professionals to reconsider previous assessments established for the teaching of reading. The move for literacy is causing educators to take a closer look at exactly what makes children become good readers. According to Strickland (1990), literacy is no longer regarded as simply a cognitive skill but as a complete activity, possessing linguistic and psycholinguistic aspects. This author further states that learning to read and write in life begins early and is an ongoing process.

According to Burns, Roe and Ross (1982) the process of reading involves not only the perception of symbols and words but the ability to give meaning to words based

on direct life experiences.

Blanton, Moorman, and Wood (1991) believe that the teaching of reading should center around a purpose for learning having clear instructional goals. These authors stated that when appropriate guidelines are provided for children, reading comprehension and interest for reading improves.

The great debate relative to the most effective methods of teaching reading dates back many decades. Recent research heavily supports the theory that children who are fortunate enough to have vast experiences in literature eventually become better readers than those children of less fortunate fate (Eldredge & Butterfield, 1986. Huck, Hepler & Hickman, 1987). Additional support of this research is shown in the works of Teale and Martinez (1988). In addition to lending support to the conclusions of the aforementioned researchers, these theorist suggest that there is an urgent need for daily reading, to and with children, in the early years.

Now, more than ever before, we are seeing increasing pressure placed on the shoulders of our nation's teachers for an improvement in reading scores. Many teachers are evaluated based on students'

performance on standardized tests. According to MacGinite and MacGinite (1989), if students perform poorly on standardized tests there is a direct correlation between test scores and teaching materials and strategies. Additionally, in numerous cases, test scores confirm teacher evaluation, thus, those classes receiving subaverage test scores clearly call for not only the reassessment of materials, but focus on the ability and techniques of the teacher as well (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilderson, 1985). This evaluation creates insurmountable anticipation in that teachers are constantly seeking for ways in which to increase the overall reading ability of children (Maria, 1990). For years, educators have disagreed on the definition of what constitutes good reading. Now, more than ever before, the teaching of reading, using the most effective method has become a source of great controversy (Weaver, 1991). According to Patton, Polloway, and Payne (1989) reading approaches can be divided into two types: developmental and remedial. Developmental approaches emphasize daily sequential instructions and are usually centered around a basal reading program. On the other hand, remedial approaches consist of various teaching techniques and programs that

have been designed to focus on learning deficits.

Over the past decade, research has shown that teaching reading using the basal approach has been the preferred method for numerous educators. Many teachers feel that children cannot learn to read and write correctly and effectively if taught by methods other than the basal approach. Thomas (1991) gives an excellent report on views of how children learn to read. He discusses the debate between the whole language approach to teaching reading, versus the basal approach. Even though Thomas presents arguments for both sides, he clearly established his nonbiased attitude for both approaches.

In a view opposing the basal approach to teaching reading, Manning and Manning (1988) believed that many skills taught using the basal approach are confusing to children. They go on to say that the structure of the basal text takes away from the creativity of teaching reading. This is especially true in the lower development level and makes children ill at ease when confronted with new words which are unfamiliar. These writers concede that the basal approach may not be detrimental to those children who easily comprehend and enjoy the processes involved in reading, but in those

children who have not mastered such skills, or who do not have a broad background in literacy experience, large doses of reading presented by the basal approach may prove to be traumatic to their overall educational experience.

In recent years, the method of whole language instruction has flooded our schools as the best solution for helping children master reading skills. According to Linford (1987), this whole language approach is based on the philosophy that when children are able to rely on much of their experience, they not only learn language, but they also learn to make sense of their world. Lamme (1989) further states that the whole language curriculum must be full of creativity. additionally, to be effective utilizing the whole language approach, teachers and children must be free to take risks and make errors while teaching and while learning.

Gothard and Russell (1990) state that the goal of the whole language approach to teaching reading should revolve around the elimination of basal readers, sequential skills, strick guidelines and prescribed instructional procedures. Additionally, whole language should focus on holistic learning, which allows children

to construct their own learning from current and past experiences.

When determining the effectiveness of the whole language approach versus the basal approach, there are many variables that play a significant role. The most important variable is that of the learning process itself. In a whole language process, learning is taking place in terms of a natural course. The children are taught whole to part, whereas each learner deductively obtain knowledge in an individualized manner. In the whole language classroom, teacher participation in the student's learning process is the active and necessary ingredient. In a study by Routman (1988), substantial support is given to the concept of whole language in that the author strongly suggest that exposure of children to quality literature can result in their natural love for reading.

The specific purposes of this study were:

1. To assess the attitudes and perceptions of elementary school teachers toward the use of the whole language approach to teaching reading.
2. To assess the attitudes and perceptions of elementary school teachers toward the use of the basal approach to teaching reading.

3. To examine the attitudes and perceptions of elementary school teachers with respect to the basic classification variables of: age, number of years teaching experience, educational background, number of years teaching whole language, number of years teaching the basal, reason for teaching whole language, and content area.

Research Methodology

The subjects for this study were 156 (89.4%) respondents from a randomly chosen group of 175 teachers currently teaching reading in elementary schools in various school districts in the state of Mississippi. These teachers were currently using the whole language approach to teach reading, but had also had experience teaching reading using the basal approach.

Each participant was sent the Coleman Whole Language Attitude Scale as a means of measuring their perception of the whole language reading strategy as well as the strategy incorporated by means of using the basal approach to teach reading.

To ensure a high percentage of responses, follow-up questionnaires were sent to those subjects who did not respond to the initial correspondence.

The instrument was designed with two parts. Part I of the questionnaire consisted of seven checklist questions designed to ascertain the respondents' demographic characteristics: (1) age, (2) number of years teaching, (3) educational qualifications, (4) number of years teaching reading using the whole language approach, (5) number of years teaching reading using the basal approach, (6) respondents' reason for teaching using the whole language approach, and (7) teaching content area.

Part II of the questionnaire consisted of nineteen (19) rank type statements. These statements were designed to solicit respondents' attitudes and perceptions concerning the whole language approach to teaching reading as compared to teaching reading using the basal approach. Respondents were asked to indicate, on a four (4) point scale, to what extent they agreed or disagreed with nineteen statements relative to their attitude toward the whole language approach to teaching reading.

Descriptive statistics was used to determine the frequencies and the mean in each one of the choices listed in the response category for all questionnaire items of the survey.

The Chi-Square Statistical Test of Goodness of Fit was used to determine if there was a greater preponderance of the type of response among the choices listed for each questionnaire item.

The Chi-Square Statistical Test of Independence was used to determine if attitudes and perceptions toward the whole language approach were significantly related to specific demographic variables.

Results:

A summary of the statistical analysis of the data from the surveys returned in terms of the demographic variables showed that the typical whole language teacher is 45 years or older (45.3%), has been teaching using the whole language approach for 1-5 years (100%), and have 15 or more years of actual teaching experience (46.8%). In addition, the typical whole language teacher surveyed holds a master's degree (40.4%), has taught using the basal approach at least 1-5 years (32.1%), is a resource (teaching all subjects) teacher in grades K-3 (76.9%), and is teaching using the whole language approach by choice (52.6%).

Statistical analysis revealed no significant relationships were found toward the general attitudes and perceptions of whole language in terms of age,

educational qualifications, total number of years teaching experience, and total number of years teaching whole language ($p > .05$).

However, results did suggest that of the 156 teachers surveyed, significant relationships were found when comparing reasons for teaching whole language with the overall attitude toward utilizing this teaching method ($p < .05$) in that the majority of those teachers who were teaching by choice were also more satisfied with their jobs.

Additionally, Of the 156 individuals surveyed, a majority 133 (87.6%) had positive responses to the proposed effectiveness of whole language. Futhermore, those respondents teaching whole language by choice tended to agree more on the effectiveness of whole language ($p < .05$).

When analyzing reason for teaching whole language and content area as it related to prior whole language opportunities and the teaching of reading a significant relationship was revealed ($p < .05$) in that teachers support a willingness to teach whole language had the opportunity presented itself in previous years.

Of the 156 individuals responding, 119 (77.3%) stated that they would have utilized the whole language approach to

teaching reading prior to the last five years had the opportunity presented itself.

Statistical analysis revealed an overwhelmingly 152 (98.1%) of the teachers responded in a positive manner in support of the integration of authentic life experiences in the whole language curriculum. Again, the overwhelming majority of these respondents were teaching by choice rather than by mandate.

Finally, in terms of reasons for teaching whole language, it was found that there was a significant relationship between reason for teaching whole language, whether or not mandated, and whole language teaching preference ($p<.05$). an overwhelming majority of teachers (87.1%) agreed that teachers should be allowed to select their preferred method of teaching reading.

Findings also revealed that those teachers having 1-5 years experience had a higher incidence of opposition to teaching, using the basal approach, than any other experience group.

Overall, the respondents disagreed or responded negatively in terms of the basal approach being an effective method of teaching reading (65.2%).

Risk factors, in terms of total number of years having taught the basal approach to reading, played a significant role. Of the 156 individuals surveyed,

142 of the respondents (91.6%) felt that students should be allowed to take risks in all given academic tasks without being penalized when implementing the whole language approach to teach children to read effectively ($p<.05$). Results also revealed that teachers with the least amount of experience tended to agree more with the element of risk taking in the whole language curriculum than veteran teachers.

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Table 1

Summary of Attitudes and Perceptions on the Use of Whole Language for Teaching Reading

AVM = Agree Very Much A= Agree D = Disagree DVM = Disagree Very Much

Item	AVM	A	D	DVM	Mean
1. I am teaching because I could not find a job unrelated to education.	2	7	20	126	1.26
Expected in each cell = 39, df = 3, X = 264.6923, p < .05					
2. I am satisfied with my current teaching position	95	50	8	3	3.52
Expected in each cell = 39, df = 3, X = 141.3846, p < .05					
3. I teach whole language because it has proven to be an effective method of teaching reading.	45	88	16	3	3.15
Expected in each cell = 38, df = 3, X = 112.0526, p < .05					

(table continues)

Table 1

AVM = Agree Very Much A = Agree D = Disagree DVM = Disagree Very Much

Item	AVM	A	D	DVM	Mean
4. In general, I enjoy teaching.	109	43	3	0	3.68
Expected in each cell = 39, df = 3, X = 198.2821, P < .001					
5. My job is much easier as a result of utilizing the whole language approach rather than the basal approach.	28	61	49	15	2.67
Expected in each cell = 51, df = 2, X = 112.3922, P.<.001					
6. I have noticed an overall improvement in the reading performance of my students since implementing the whole language approach.	28	91	33	3	2.93
Expected in each cell = 39, df = 3, X = 106.5897, P.<.001					

(table continues)

Table 1

AVM = Agree Very Much A = Agree D = Disagree DVM = Disagree Very Much

Item	AVM	A	D	DVM	Mean
7. The whole language approach to teaching reading has an advantage over the basal approach in that the whole language approach incorporates practical experiences in life.	51	87	15	2	3.21
Expected in each cell = 39, df = 3, X =112.6410, P. <.05					
8. I would have used the whole language approach to teach reading years before now had the opportunity presented itself.	43	76	28	7	3.01
Expected in each cell = 39 df = 3 X =64.8718 P. <.001					
9. The whole language approach to teaching reading is a wonderful teaching method to use for the improvement of reading skills for all children.	43	79	27	6	3.03
expected in each cell = 39 df= 3, X =73.0513, P.<.001					

(table continues)

Table 1

AVM = Agree Very Much A = Agree D = Disagree DVM = Disagree Very Much

Item	AVM	A	D	DVM	Mean
10. The integration of language in the whole language approach allows children to relate to authentic experiences.	59	93	3	0	3.36
Expected in each cell = 39	df = 3,	X =157.2564,		P. <.001	
11. Literature and language experiences have greatly enhanced my reading curriculum	67	77	11	0	3.36
Expected in each cell = 39	df=2,	X =155.205,		P. <.05.	
12. The basal reading approach should be used with children who are not experiencing major difficulties in reading.	11	42	69	30	2.22
Expected in each cell = 52	df = 2,	X = 48.6731,		P. <.05	

(table continues)

Table 1

AVM = Agree Very Much A = Agree D = Disagree DVM = Disagree Very Much

Item	AVM	A	D	DVM	Mean
13. Teachers should be allowed to select their preferred method of teaching.	61	74	18	2	3.25
Expected in each cell = 39	df =3	X = 90.2308		P. <.05.	
14. Teachers should be properly trained and evaluated before being given the responsibility of teaching utilizing a specific method.	73	70	11	1	3.39
Expected in each cell = 39	df= 3	X = 111.4103		P.<.001	
15. Teachers should have a minimum of six college credits or forty workshop hours prior to implementing the whole language approach to teaching reading.	39	67	39	9	2.88
Expected in each cell = 39,	df =3,	X = 43.1795,		P. <.005	

(table continues)

Table 1

AVM = Agree Very Much A = Agree D = Disagree DVM = Disagree Very Much

Item	AVM	A	D	DVM	Mean
16. Teachers should encourage children to take risks in the whole language curriculum.	62	80	11	2	3.30
Expected in each cell =39	df=3	X =111.8718		P.<.05.	
17. Teachers should provide learners with choices when utilizing the method of whole language teaching.	55	93	5	8	3.28
Expected in each cell =39	df =3	X = 144.2051		P. < .01	
18. Teachers should play a variety of supportive roles utilizing the whole language approach for teaching reading.	71	82	3	0	3.44
Expected in each cell = 39,	df = 3,	X = 145.8974,		P. < .01	

(table continues)

Table 1

AVM = Agree Very Much A = Agree D = Disagree DVM = Disagree Very Much

Item	AVM	A	D	DVM	Mean
19. Teachers should develop whole language curiculums with a sense of trust in the learner.	60	81	12	2	3.28
Expected in each cell =39	df=3,	X =110.3333,		P.	< .01